

CLAIMS

1. An item handling system, comprising:
at least one item preparation station for printing machine-readable symbols on
5 items; and
at least one item handling station for receiving items from the at least one item
preparation station and being operable to machine read and process information
contained in the symbols printed on the items;
wherein:
10 the at least one item handling station includes a messaging unit for generating
messages representative of the readability of symbols read thereby and
transmitting the messages to the at least one item preparation station; and
the at least one item preparation station includes an indicator for providing an
indication of a readability of symbols printed thereby in response to messages
15 received from the at least one item handling station.
2. The system of claim 1, wherein the symbols are two-dimensional symbols.
3. The system of claim 1, wherein the symbols include information evidencing
20 payment.
4. The system of claim 1, wherein the symbols include information identifying the
at least one item preparation station which printed the same.
- 25 5. The system of claim 1, wherein the messages categorize the readability of
symbols into one of a plurality of categories according to a level of readability.
6. The system of claim 1, wherein the indicator of the at least one item preparation
station is configured to provide an indication of a probable cause of a reduced
30 level of readability of symbols.

7. The system of claim 6, wherein the probable cause includes at least one of a low amount of printing medium, a defective print head, improper print head installation and improper material of the items.

5 8. The system of claim 1, wherein the at least one item preparation station is configured to be disabled where the level of readability of symbols printed thereby is below a predeterminable level.

10 9. The system of claim 8, wherein the at least one item preparation station is configured to be disabled where the level of readability of a predeterminable number of symbols printed thereby is below a predeterminable level in a predeterminable period of time.

15 10. The system of claim 1, further comprising:
a service center for logging service requests for item preparation stations;
and wherein the system is configured to log a service request at the service center where the level of readability of symbols printed by the at least one item preparation station is below a predeterminable level.

20 11. The system of claim 10, wherein the system is configured to log a service request at the service center where the level of readability of a predeterminable number of symbols printed by the at least one item preparation station is below a predeterminable level in a predeterminable period of time.

25 12. The system of claim 1, wherein the at least one item preparation station is configured to prepare items as batches of items, and the messaging unit of the at least one item handling station is configured to generate messages representative of the readability of symbols on items from respective ones of batches of items.

30 13. The system of claim 12, wherein a message categorizes the readability of symbols on items from a batch of items into one of a plurality of categories such as to provide an indication as to the numbers of items in each category.

14. The system of claim 1, wherein the indicator of the at least one item preparation station includes a display and the indication is a visual indication.

5 15. The system of claim 1, wherein the at least one item preparation station and the at least one item handling station are remotely located.

16. The system of claim 15, wherein the at least one item preparation station and the at least one item handling station are configured to communicate by a remote communications link.

10 17. The system of claim 1, wherein each message forms part of a response message or a sequence of grouped messages.

15 18. The system of claim 1, comprising:
a plurality of item preparation stations;
and wherein the at least one item handling station is configured to transmit messages to the ones of the item preparation stations which prepared the respective items.

20 19. The system of claim 1, comprising:
a plurality of item handling stations.

25 20. The system of claim 1, comprising:
a plurality of item preparation stations; and
a plurality of item handling stations;
and wherein the item handling stations are configured to transmit messages to the ones of the item preparation stations which prepared the respective items.

30 21. The system of claim 1, wherein the items are mail items.

22. The system of claim 21, wherein any or each item preparation station comprises a postage meter.

23. An item preparation station for printing machine-readable symbols on items, including an indicator for providing an indication of the readability of symbols printed thereby in response to messages, representative of the readability of the symbols, received from at least one item handling station.

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24. The station of claim 23, wherein the symbols are two-dimensional symbols.

25. The station of claim 23, wherein the symbols include information evidencing payment.

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26. The station of claim 23, wherein the messages categorize the readability of symbols into one of a plurality of categories according to a level of readability.

27. The station of claim 23, wherein the indicator is configured to provide an indication of a probable cause of a reduced level of readability of symbols.

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28. The station of claim 27, wherein the probable cause includes at least one of a low amount of printing medium, a defective print head, improper print head installation and improper material of the items.

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29. The station of claim 23, wherein the item preparation station is configured to be disabled where the level of readability of symbols printed thereby is below a predeterminable level.

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30. The station of claim 29, wherein the item preparation station is configured to be disabled where the level of readability of a predeterminable number of symbols printed thereby is below a predeterminable level in a predeterminable period of time.

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31. The station of claim 23, wherein the item preparation station is configured to prepare items as batches of items, and the messages are representative of the readability of symbols on items from respective ones of batches of items.

32. The station of claim 31, wherein a message categorizes the readability of symbols on items from a batch of items into one of a plurality of categories such as to provide an indication as to the numbers of items in each category.

5 33. The station of claim 23, wherein the indicator includes a display and the indication is a visual indication.

34. The station of claim 23, wherein each message forms part of a response message or a sequence of grouped messages.

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35. The station of claim 23, wherein the items are mail items.

36. The station of claim 35, wherein the item preparation station comprises a postage meter.

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37. An item preparation system, comprising:
the item preparation station of claim 23; and
a service center for logging service requests for the item preparation station;
wherein the item preparation station is configured to log a service request at the
service center where the level of readability of symbols printed thereby is below
a predeterminable level.

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38. The system of claim 37, wherein the item preparation station is configured to log a service request at the service center where the level of readability of a predeterminable number of symbols printed thereby is below a predeterminable level in a predeterminable period of time.

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39. An item handling station for receiving items from at least one item preparation station, comprising:
a machine-reading unit for machine reading and processing information contained in symbols printed on the items; and

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a messaging unit for generating messages representative of the readability of symbols read thereby and transmitting the messages to the at least one item preparation station.

- 5 40. The station of claim 39, wherein the symbols are two-dimensional symbols.
41. The station of claim 39, wherein the symbols include information evidencing payment.
- 10 42. The station of claim 39, wherein the symbols include information identifying the at least one item preparation station which printed the same.
43. The station of claim 39, wherein the messages categorize the readability of symbols into one of a plurality of categories according to the level of readability.
- 15 44. The station of claim 39, wherein the at least one item preparation station is configured to prepare items as batches of items, and the messaging unit is configured to generate messages representative of the readability of symbols on items from respective ones of batches of items.
- 20 45. The station of claim 44, wherein a message categorizes the readability of symbols on items from a batch of items into one of a plurality of categories such as to provide an indication as to the numbers of items in each category.
- 25 46. The station of claim 39, wherein the item handling station is configured to receive items from a plurality of item preparation stations and transmit messages to the ones of the item preparation stations which prepared the respective items.
47. The station of claim 39, wherein each message forms part of a response message or a sequence of grouped messages.
- 30 48. The station of claim 39, wherein the items are mail items.

49. An item handling system, comprising:
the item handling station of claim 39; and
a service center for logging service requests for item preparation stations;
wherein the item handling station is configured to log a service request at the
5 service center for an item preparation station where the level of readability of
symbols printed by the item preparation station is below a predeterminable level.
50. The system of claim 49, wherein the item handling station is configured to log a
10 service request at the service center where the level of readability of a
predeterminable number of symbols printed by the item preparation station is
below a predeterminable level in a predeterminable period of time.